

Book Reviews

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Elements of Architecture. Assembling Archaeology, Atmosphere and the Performance of Building Spaces

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This edited volume explores architecture as constructed place. Challenging and problematizing conceptions of what constitutes architecture, it urges a re-evaluation of modes of engagement with archaeological material, whilst emphasizing the critical importance of rigorous theorization. *Elements of Architecture* comprises 27 chapters, with contributions from practitioners drawn from a range of specialisms including archaeology, anthropology, geography, architecture and performance studies, reflecting the interdisciplinary remit of the series to which this volume forms a valuable addition. The content is organized around four broad themes: form and temporality; atmosphere; performance and process; and disintegration and unfinishedness. Within

this structure, common and sometimes unexpected threads emerge, such as affect, assemblage, heritage and failure, weaving through papers of diverse content to make links that bridge the thematic divides. The result is a comprehensive and unified volume which compels and deserves repeated reading.

The volume opens with two introductory chapters that advocate contrasting ontological stances: the former New Materialist; the latter anti-materialist, or 'formalist', Harman's preferred term (page 35). This manoeuvre foregrounds the active, often disputed, perspectives emerging within this field of research. Recognition and provision of space for discordant perspectives is applaudable; although through the very act of provisioning for multi-vocality, the relational standpoint of New Materialism is reinforced, albeit implicitly. The identification of architecture as a vital, dynamic process—an unfolding of action, matter and intention, as well as serendipity—is a key position tendered by the majority of contributors and drives much of the discussion.

This volume maintains an overarching cross-disciplinary stance, with focused discussions on archaeological material supported by specific case studies with a broad temporal and geographic reach underpinning many of the contributions. Through an examination of the archaeological remains of southern British Neolithic long barrows, McFadyen (Chapter Four), for example, draws forth the intricate, relationally emergent interdependencies of bodies and materials and the different temporalities therein implicated to generate a corporeally grounded interpretation of architectural practice. Lucas and Harris also focus on the situated practices manifest in archaeological remains. In Chapter Seven, Lucas traces structural change over time through examination of a site that formed part of an Icelandic episcopal manor in use between c.1630–1785 (pages 108–119) to reveal complex, overlapping temporalities engendered in its ongoing construction. Harris (Chapter 13), meanwhile, uses findings from recent fieldwork undertaken on the Ardnamurchan peninsula in Scotland—including the site of a Post-Medieval settlement, a Neolithic chambered tomb and Bronze Age kerbed cairn, and the landscape as an architectural entity in itself—to investigate the affective force of architectural assemblages. Contemporary archaeology is also well represented, with chapters discussing diverse topics, from the development of urban centres in the Andes (Kohn and Dawdy, Chapter Eight), to the anticipatory future archaeology of nuclear waste facilities in New Mexico (Joyce, Chapter 27).

A significant number of papers approach architecture from perspectives in which the archaeological value is not explicitly discussed. The editors provide guidance to each chapter with introductory sections, allowing the reader to make independent connections. The text is all the richer for allowing space for individual engagement and response. Minkjan and Vaikla's photo essay, *Brussels' conflicting constructs* (Chapter Nine), documents the juxtaposition and discordant architectures of an unfolding city driven by intersecting political, economic, social, cultural and, thereby, aesthetic agendas (page 149). Its layered complexity results from, and is productive of, different practices and modes of engagement, each with different time frames. This links it directly with other chapters in the volume, including Harris's *Affective architecture in Ardnamurchan* (Chapter 13) and, through its exploration of Brussels' multiple identities, invites comparison with Chapter 16, *Politics of architectural imaging: four ways of assembling a city* (Yaneva). The latter follows the recent architect-designed reconstruction of Birmingham New Street station façade and frames Birmingham, England as a 'multiple city'. The described architectural process reveals Birmingham as a thronging assemblage; a complex, multi-faceted urban centre, a transport hub with a highly mobile, transient population, showing a strong affinity with DeLanda's (2006) articulation of Deleuze and Guattari's assemblages. Both examples emphasize the contingent nature of constructed place, prompting reflection on how understanding of archaeological remains may be approached. The utility of extending and testing the latitude of archaeological approaches to architecture to include performativity is confirmed by Kaye (Chapter 20), who cites the work of artist/performance architect Vito Acconci via the gender politics of Judith Butler (2006), the land art of Robert Smithson and others to explore and problematize architecture as phenomenological experience.

A commitment to theoretical engagement is evident throughout, as the key themes of the volume resonate with concerns driving current theoretical debates in archaeology. Here, Pétursdóttir's contribution (Chapter 24) stands out. Through research undertaken at Eyri, a 1950s herring station at Ingólfssfjörður, Iceland, Pétursdóttir responds to its ruination and its fragility, and finds that its affective power forces a re-evaluation of contemporary approaches to performing heritage as well as the nature of her archaeological practice. Starting from a position that embraces emotion, she demonstrates the power of rethinking not only theoretical approaches to architecture, but also the mode of this engage-

ment, through to the language of academic discourse. Herein lies one of the main strengths of this publication: its positivity and optimism. Rather than bemoaning the inadequacies of past practices, it exemplifies the value and potential of new approaches. Coupled with its interdisciplinary remit, its broad geographic and temporal reach and thoughtful editing, this volume constitutes an important contribution to contemporary archaeological and architectural debate.

References

- Butler, J. 2006. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- DeLanda, M. 2006. *A New Philosophy of Society. Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. London: Continuum.